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THE RATIONALITY OF PERCEPTION, BY SUSANNA SIEGEL

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Throughout its history the philosophy of perception has sought to understand the nature and role of normal perception by considering some of its deviations from the norm, in particular, and notoriously, cases of illusion and hallucination. Susanna Siegel's rich and important book seeks to continue this tradition in connection with a novel but equally pervasive deviation in which how things look to a perceiver depends upon her prior outlook and attitudes in a way that apparently leaves her subject to some form of criticism. The basic phenomenon is surely familiar, important, and deserving of philosophical investigation. I am less convinced by Siegel's particular framework for explaining the deviation and for understanding and illuminating the normal epistemic role of perception as a result.

For simplicity I organize my discussion around one of Siegel's paradigm examples, although an aspect of the book's richness is her sensitivity to the variety of related phenomena and the potential for differences in their structure. Nevertheless, Siegel's contention is that the core of their explanation is the same.

> Before seeing Jack, Jill fears that Jack is angry at her. When she sees him, her fear causes her to perceive Jack as angry [at the level of visual experience

> rather than merely influencing her perceptual belief], and this perception strengthens her fear. (p. 6)

Jill has no indication that her experience is misleading and simply believes that Jack is as her experiences represents him: angry. This suggests that she has the rational support that experience normally confers for her fear that Jack is angry. Yet she only has this support because she feared that Jack is angry in the first place; and so that fear has effectively acquired rational support from itself in a way that seems wrong. This is the problem of hijacked experience (p. 6): how can we explain Jill's epistemic failing without undermining the rational role of perceptual experience?

Siegel's solution to the problem of hijacked experience is that it is not rational for Jill to believe that Jack is angry on the basis of her experience that he is angry because that experience itself is irrational in being the result of an epistemically inappropriate inference: one that relies upon an epistemically inappropriate prior attitude as a premise, is circular, or involves jumping to unwarranted conclusions. Elaborating this particular case, she appeals to the last of these epistemic vices, but she gives examples of the others too. She considers various arguments against the idea that experiences might be rationally evaluable from premises to the effect that they are passive or unadjustable in the light of competing reasons; and she rejects these on the grounds that certain varieties of passivity and unadjustability apply equally to beliefs and that in other senses experiences are in fact adjustable.

Siegel's general contention is that experiences are rationally evaluable in virtue of belonging, like beliefs, to the subject's outlook: the way the world seems to her to be. Call this the Outlook Thesis, (OT). One way in which they enter her outlook is on the basis of inference and they are then rationally evaluable in the light of the epistemic merits of the relevant inference. Alongside this line of thought, Siegel also offers the Phenomenal Ground Argument, (PGA), as a basis for the idea that experiences have epistemic power to justify beliefs with appropriately related contents: this is due to their having presentational phenomenal character. On the basis of their subsequent development, I understand this combination of ideas as follows. Presentational phenonmenal character endows experience with a baseline epistemic power to justify relevant beliefs. In the presence of an inferential basis for experience, this baseline may be downgraded or uplifted by the credentials of the supporting inference, yielding the final epistemic standing and powers of the experience.

In the case of Jill's experience of Jack, the idea is this. Jill has an experience representing Jack as angry that has prima facie epistemic power to support her belief that he is angry; but this apparent power is in fact downgraded because her experience is derived by epistemically inappropriate inference on the basis of her prior fear that he is angry. More precisely, her diagnosis of the error is that Jill's fear leads her to jump from a sub-experience representing Jack has having a blank stare to an unwarranted sub-experiential conclusion representing that he is angry; this in turn appears (in virtue of its presentational phenomenology), but fails (in virtue of its inappropriate inferential basis), to support her belief that Jack is angry.

One question to ask about the general approach here is whether inference leading to an experiential conclusion always rests in this way on a more basic (sub-)experiential premise truly at epistemic baseline, or whether there may be inferential experiences without any sub-experiential premises. I can see lines of objection to either option. The former gives a certain priority to (PGA) and the latter favours (OT). The objections I see suggest a tension between (PGA) and (OT).

Suppose, to take the latter option first, that there may be inferential experiences without any sub-experiential premises. Assume further that for any visual experience, a situation can be constructed in which a phenomenally indistinguishable experience is produced by epistemically inappropriate inference with no sub-experiential premises. The latter is downgraded as a result and has no power to support any beliefs with relevant contents; yet, in the context of Siegel's non-disjunctive Content View, it has the same presentational phenomenal character as the experience that we began with. So how can that phenomenal character be a source of positive epistemic charge? It is difficult to see how presentational phenomenal character alone confers baseline epistemic power at all. In this framework, then, the intuitive force of (PGA) depends upon the idea that experiences have at least some sub-experiences not subject to the perceiver's inferential influence. These sub-experiences may be illusory, of course; but they at least have the baseline epistemic powers conferred by their presentational phenomenal character.

This motivates the former option in answer to my question above. Inference leading to an experiential conclusion always rests on a more basic sub-experiential premise truly at epistemic baseline. As we saw, this is also the model that Siegel explicitly proposes in Jill's case. Her epistemic error is to jump from the sub-experiential premise that Jack has a blank stare to the unwarranted experiential conclusion that he is angry as a result of her prior fear that he is angry. The concern here is that, given the range of phenomena that Siegel wishes to bring under the banner of inferentially derived experiences, the range of experiential contents reliably coming in at epistemic baseline may be vanishingly narrow.

Consider the banana case. To those familiar with ripe (yellow) bananas, a greyish banana may look yellow. I assume further that the effect depends on the actual colour of the banana: a bright purple banana would not look yellow, for example. So the inference must proceed not only from a sub-experiential premise that the object is a banana, but also from one concerning its grey colour. This cannot be that the banana is grey, since this would presumably block inference to any conclusion that it is yellow. So the relevant sub-experiential premise must be that the object looks greyish. This suggests the following inference between experiential contents. E1: that looks greyish; E2: that is a banana; so E3: that is actually yellow (in bad light). Note that the experimental finding that the banana looks yellow is explained by the conclusion experience representing it as yellow; but in order to achieve this result the inference must begin with a sub-experiential premise representing the banana as looking greyish. I assume that analogous phenomena may be generated with respect to many of the basic

visible features of familiar everyday objects. So there is a danger that this option commits Siegel to the view that the only sub-experiences genuinely at epistemic baseline simply in virtue of their presentational phenomenal character are those with contents concerning, not the way such things actually are, but merely the ways they look. The epistemic standing of more objectively committal contents presumably depends on the absence or elimination of the interfering effects of inappropriate experiential inference.

There are clearly responses available to proponents of both options in answer to my initial question whether inference leading to an experiential conclusion always rests in this way on a more basic (sub-)experiential premise truly at epistemic baseline, or whether there may be inferential experiences without any sub-experiential premises. But these difficulties move me in another direction to accommodate Siegel's phenomena.

According to the Outlook Thesis, any mental state contributing to the way the world seems, in the widest sense, to be to the subject is epistemically evaluable. This applies as much to the way things look to be around her as to the way she believes things are more generally. Siegel is also right in my opinion that any such way things seem may be the result of appropriate or inappropriate attentional, inferential and other effects that might be collected under the head of the subject's epistemic character and orientation. So none have their epistemic standing solely in virtue of their phenomenology. If the conscious character of perception is to make a distinctive contribution to the full account of our empirical knowledge, this must be elsewhere. I suggest that presentational

phenomenal character is indeed crucial; but what it contributes is the domain itself of the particular worldly objects and their features – colours, shapes, sizes, textures, orientations, and so on – that we are consciously acquainted with in perception. Our outlook is then a matter of what we make of these things on the basis of our epistemic character and orientation.

In any non-hallucinatory case, we stand in a simple relation of conscious acquaintance, from a certain point of view and in specific circumstances, with various objects and their features in the world around us. This makes possible our thought about those very things and is ultimately essential to it. And this is the fundamental epistemic contribution of phenomenal consciousness in perception: not a privileged content with (defeasible) baseline epistemic standing as proposed by (PGA), but rather a more basic form of access to the world that provides the subject matter of knowledge and belief. What we actually make of the world presented in perception – the ways those things look to be – is a function of many further factors: attention (both endogenous and exogenous), interest, purpose, expectation, bias, prior assumption, emotion, other attitudes, and so on. The result is part of our outlook, subject to epistemic evaluation, and may be found wanting in virtue of any number of inappropriate influences of such factors. We may then be epistemically criticizable to the extent that the relevant factors are within our control. In other cases, though, the result may simply be a matter of our seeing, and hence knowing, that o is F.

There is certainly an epistemically evaluable transition here, from conscious acquaintance with a portion of reality to a view about the way things are in the

world; and the result may either be a piece of perceptual knowledge or fail to be so due to the inappropriate influence of factors of the kinds that Siegel rightly identifies. Characterizing this as an inference from premise contents to conclusion content invites a series of problems and objections, though, that may be avoided by this alternative account of the phenomena.

I absolutely agree with Siegel that reflection on these phenomena, and in particular her puzzle of hijacked experience, illuminates the nature of perceptual experience and perceptual knowledge; but I remain unconvinced by her attempt to provide this illumination within a framework of inference to experiential contents.